

Toll taker for 32 years wins Caltrans award

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By Judy Ronningen

The Tribune

Smile.

Take a dollar toll.

Smile. Dollar. Smile.

"Hey — happy Monday."

"Thanks."

Every few seconds, as many as 500 times an hour, John Harris goes through his morning routine in a toll booth at the Bay Bridge.

At 6½ hours a day, five days a week, for 32 years, that's a lot of smiles. *J. Harris*

That's what won the Oakland resident a special service award, the only one in the state given to a toll taker this year.

Harris makes such an impression that motorists write letters to Caltrans, says his boss, Capt. John Sant.

The even-tempered Harris trains the newcomers and even broke up a screaming fight between two other toll takers in the middle of traffic some years ago.

Harris says it's not the monotony that gets to toll takers.

It's the grouchy motorists.

"Everybody's so uptight," he says. "You don't know if a guy just got into it with his wife — and he's bringing his anger to work with him."

"On Monday I tell 'em 'Happy Monday.' It wakes 'em up and makes 'em smile."

He's seen everything on the bridge.

There's bright lights — celebrities like Danny Glover, Bing Crosby and Lou Rawls. Mayors Lionel Wilson and Art Agnos visited to turn the bridge lights on for the first time.

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as a janitor at the toll plaza in

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There's romance — men who pay double and say, "Tell that lady back there I paid her toll. I love her."

There's drama — a rolling fistfight between two brothers-in-law, one pushing the other out of a car in the middle of the bridge. Dragged by the car, his clothing shredded, the man hitched a ride with another motorist, got to the toll plaza first and resumed the fistfight.

Harris, a 1950 graduate of McClymonds High School, started as a janitor at the toll plaza in 1955 and became a collector two years later.

One of the first black collectors, he faced insults and racial taunts, recalled Beverly, his wife of 38 years.

"One time a lady came through and didn't want to put the money in his hand. She just threw it in the lane there," Beverly Harris recalled.

"She said, 'It's just like Georgia; the blacks are taking all the jobs.'"

"He didn't let it get to him," she said. "He's just that kind of guy."

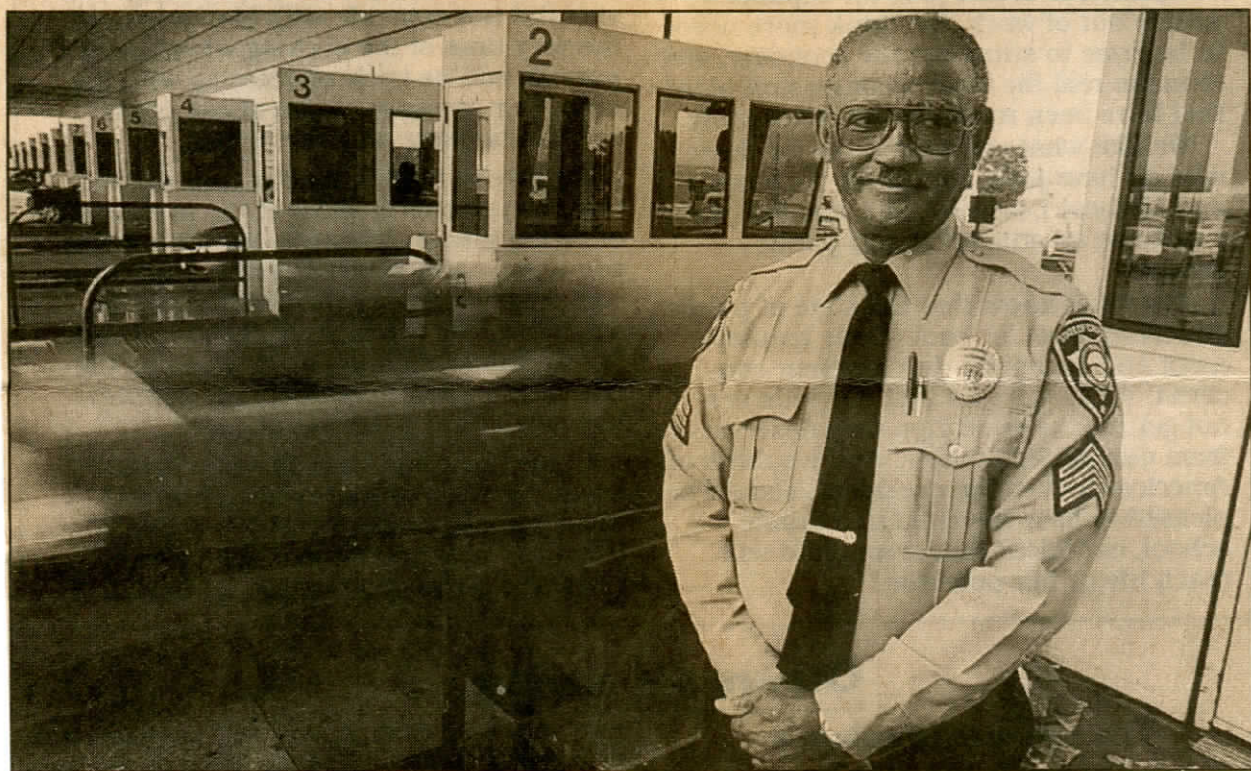
Harris' rotating schedule has kept him away from home many Christmas mornings, but the couple says it has provided a steady income to raise their six children.

All the kids plus some of the 10 grandchildren plan to be in Sacramento Aug. 2 when Harris receives his Sustained Superior Accomplishment Award from the head of Caltrans.

And even though he doesn't have quite the following of another neighborhood achiever — Oakland A's pitcher Dave Stewart, who played youth baseball with one of the Harris' sons — Harris has his fans, his wife says.

"On holidays, people give him souvenirs," she said. "If he's not at work they say, 'I had something for you.'"

"We went to Reno and a guy walked up and said: 'How is the bridge getting along without you?'"



MARY F. CALVERT

John Harris is retiring after 42 years as a Bay Bridge employee, including 35 years as a toll collector.

42 years doesn't take its toll on Harris

By Ronna Abramson

STAFF WRITER

OCT 31 1996

OAKLAND — Forty-two years of collecting money at Bay Bridge toll booths "is long enough" for John Harris, who retires today.

Harris is believed to have worked the Bay Bridge's booths longer than any other Caltrans employee.

The sergeant, a 1950 graduate of McClymonds High School and longtime Oakland resident, also supervises other toll collectors.

He comes from the old school of thought, committed to doing his best, said Capt. Thomas Edwards, Harris' supervisor.

"I don't think they make them like him anymore," Edwards said. "Anything he has been asked to do, he did."

As if to prove that, Harris agreed to work an extra shift Wednesday for a sick colleague.

Harris never arrived late for work and always ranked among the top 5 percent in accuracy, Edwards noted. In 1989, the state gave him a special service award.

"I like my job," said Harris, impeccably dressed in his blue sergeant's uniform after getting off work Tuesday. "I met a lot of interesting people."

He's greeted everyone from Bing Crosby to Danny Glover as they cruised through the toll plaza. Harris, an avid sports fan, also has met, and in some cases become friends with, a host of sports stars, including baseball's Willie Mays and Reggie Jackson and boxing's Muhammad Ali.

But he also has endeared himself to ordinary commuters, who over the years have sent many letters to Caltrans praising Harris, Edwards said.

"He's gone through a lot of times when (the motorists) were in bad moods coming through, and he would say, 'Smile, it's going to get better. Have a good day,'" said Harris' wife of 45 years, Beverly.

Harris' secret has been to always try to smile and say thank you, and to disregard the rude motorists who slam their dollar bills into collectors' hands.

As one of the first African-American toll collectors, Harris has received his share of insults and racial taunts from motorists. He also has had to break up fights between drivers and passengers, and to contend with reckless drivers.

"I was working early one morning and a car came through and turned sideways in the booth," Harris recalled. "It was two lanes over, but it scared me half to death."